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Taming the Elephant

By ROBERT ALAN JAMIESON

Robert Alan Jamieson continues the discussion, begun in NNow # 8, of dilemmas about translation for writers who choose to write in minority languages.

The State of Scots

MAOILIOS CAIMBEUL, in his essay ‘In Bed with an Elephant’, addresses issues around translation as they affect Gaelic poets and which resonate with us writers of Scots. The key difference, perhaps, is that in the case of Scots it is less easy to see where Elephant ends and bedfellow begins. Scots and English shade into one another – part of a complex spectrum of language which rounds the North Sea. Whereas cousins across the water, just as indistinct from neighbours, achieved ‘language’ status centuries ago, Scots struggled to reach such a state of grace. Its current situation is both parlous and hopeful – parlous in that it appears ever more diluted by anglicisation and globalisation; hopeful in that rather than being, as once, popularly misconceived of as the ‘broken’ version of Imperial English spoken north of the border, there is increased understanding both at home and abroad that it too has justifiable claim to ‘language’ status – as recognised, finally, by the resumed Scottish parliament.

The academic work of the last century is vital and impressive – the *Scottish National Dictionary*¹, produced between 1931 and 1976 under the editorship of firstly William Grant and latterly David Murison, set out to represent the full spectrum of Scottish vocabulary, and its single volume spin-off² helped publicise the richness of the Scots tongue. In the 80s Billy Kay provided a popular yet informative assessment of both the history and late 20th situation³ and William Donaldson’s research illuminated an overlooked area, the widespread use of Scots in the press in an era which previously had been regarded as something of a low point.⁴

Scots in the 21st century began with Matthew Fitt’s first novel, a groundbreaking futuristic dystopia,⁵ and Fitt’s subsequent work in tandem with James Robertson in the Itchy Co⁶ project is providing books for children that have proved – surprisingly, to many doubters – genuinely popular. 2003 saw the publication of *The Edinburgh Companion to Scots*,⁷ an important benchmark academic work which further underlined this new-found status, and in 2004 a team at Dundee University digitised the full text of all ten volumes of the *SND* and made them available free via the *Dictionary of the Scots Language* site.

The pluralistic approach employed in these key works, recording historical and geographical variants, shows Scots to be a very broad kirk, reaching from Shetland to Ulster, encompassing urban and rural – a ‘pluricentric diasystem’. The question of a fixed or standard orthography, for so long a sore issue, now appears less pressing in the

postmodern era. Variations co-exist – indeed, it is a happy thing that they should.

Despite the obvious parallel experience of marginalisation, the relationship between Scots and ‘the Elephant’ is markedly different from that of Gaelic. Many English people understand Scots – north eastern English dialects particularly have much in common with the southern forms of Scots, reminding us that the old kingdom of Northumbria reached from Forth to Humber, that it was to the south of Humber the land of the Angles began, and that traffic and trade across the border is both ancient and everyday. A quick look at the work of Bill Griffiths⁸, for instance, will confirm this sense that the forms of West Germanic found on the east coast of Britain do not neatly fit the current political map. There are many specific examples I could quote, but a favourite one of mine is the word ‘haar’. In my adopted home of Edinburgh, people take a certain pride in naming the North Sea fog thus, as if it was specifically an Edinburgh (or Leith) phenomenon. But it is a word used as far north as Shetland and, according to the OED, as far south as the Humber. Another example comes from a small pamphlet of Yorkshire dialect writing I picked up years ago. I was amazed at the title – ‘Cum thee Wis’ – which I recognised immediately as ‘Kum de wis’ (‘come this way’) from the tongue of Shetland. The contents too seemed very familiar.

So it is a complicated picture. Even the name ‘Scots’ is potentially misleading, for as we know the Scots themselves were originally Celtic and not Germanic, and the term firstly referred to Scottish Gaelic. While one of the distinguishing factors between Scots and the other West Germanic tongues is its many Gaelic loan words and phrases, it is relatively easy for the language we now call Scots to blend into English – too easy, some might say. The danger of ‘false friends’, or ‘negative transference’ is great, where the same root word has evolved different meanings over time. Compared with Gaelic, it is not so easy to distinguish Scots, to maintain a ‘forked tongue’ as W.N. Herbert calls it. In the work of writers such as Kathleen Jamie or Don Paterson, we find a quieter Scots voice inhabiting their predominantly English language work, rather in the manner that the voice of Orkney inhabits the work of George Mackay Brown – the occasional word amongst an otherwise English text, perhaps the odd idiom translated to give the feel of Scots. As a result, the need to translate into English is less pressing – in many cases a small glossary is quite sufficient.

But in my own case, or that of my native tongue, the picture is different. I come from the most northern part of the Scots world, and grew up speaking a very distinctive form with considerable North Germanic

(Scandinavian) elements, even 500 hundred years after the transfer of political power from Copenhagen to Edinburgh. Shetland’s long history of North Sea trade with speakers of Dutch, Frisian, and Low Saxon is also a factor. Distinctiveness for the Shetlander is not an issue. The problem is more what to do with those parts of the local tongue that do not fit neatly into the English or the Scots alphabet, particularly the ‘Scandinavian vowels’ as they were once termed by the education authorities – but these issues I have written about elsewhere, and lie beyond the remit of this essay.⁹ I should mention, however, the vital work of the late John J. Graham in the 20th century, the key figure in giving the Shetland tongue the same authoritative credibility described earlier in relation to Scots as a whole.¹⁰

Translation: visibility and enrichment

Visibility is a difficulty for any writer, if they are at all bothered about their work being read. In situations where the medium is a smaller tongue isolated by a larger, where the media is largely conducted in a ‘foreign’ language, this difficulty is obviously magnified. I recall an interview with the Faroese poet Rói Patursson, winner of the Nordic Council’s prize for literature in 1986, where he bemoaned the fact that Faroese writers had a maximum of some 48,000 readers. At the time I thought this substantial, but of course not all the people of Faroe read poetry. And the point is linguistic isolation, not poetic.

The ‘minority’ writer is invisible to a world which does not know how to decode and so cannot recognise the merits of the work. A true poet may well make poetry whether anyone reads it or not, but we are entitled to ask, after Derrida, whether it is fully writing if no one reads it. And so, for the writer working in a so-called minority language, translation takes on a much greater importance. The irony is, perhaps, that the very Elephant that threatens to squash its smaller bedfellow, can also be the beast that helps transport. For the Elephant has a back so broad it can be a ‘bridge’ language that carries little us to distant others – others like ourselves, marginal and isolated from

an Elephantine viewpoint. And to use the English as a beast of burden is perhaps a kind of revenge for being long-squashed; a tool to increased interaction and propagation of minority language via translation. This, I suggest, is payback for centuries of cultural imperialism – the revenge of the bedfellow. But here I must add that this Elephant has been, to me, a marvellous craitur, has carried me as reader from steppe to dustbowl, from old world to new, from saga to haiku. While I do not wish to be swallowed by it, I am grateful to it.

My own first experience of translation was into English. It grew out of a friendship made at the Scottish Universities International Summer School in 1989, in ‘Soviet times’. Volodymyr Dibrova had something he wanted to show people ‘in the west’ – that Ukrainian literature existed – and I fell into line, working the literals he provided into the target language – English – for *Edinburgh Review*¹¹. One thing he explained to me was the iconic place of the letter ‘i’ in Ukrainian, for it was this symbol that most distinctively marked Ukrainian from Russian – which reminded me of the non-English graphs in my Shetlandic work. And I consider this approach apposite for Scots generally, as one feature of Scots which distinguishes it from the southern Elephant is that whereas English lost the sound once represented by the graph ‘æ’ centuries ago – a short ‘a’ – Scots did not; so that MacDiarmid’s famous line, for instance, might be represented as: “I’ll hæ næ haufwæ hoose.”¹²

Following this work with Volodymyr Dibrova, I was approached to work with Nadia Kjurik on a Ukrainian feature for

Index on Censorship, focusing on Yevgen Pashkov’ski.¹³ I later worked on a similar basis with Liv Schei, on a novel from the Danish, and out of all this a habit developed. I got to like the process. And about this time I began to translate myself – that is, began to make bilingual text. I realise now in doing so I was recognising that the child inside me had been translating ever since starting school in

Shetland in 1963. In 1989, those Ukrainian translations were a political act – anti-Soviet – and the translations I began to make of my own work had that tenor to me. They were statements – notifications – of existence in English. I aimed for redress – if not equivalence then at least a relation, a speaking-to-►►

► one-another, a dialogue between the voice of Home and the voice of Education.

My involvement with *Literature Across Frontiers*¹⁴ in recent years has developed this interest. *LAF* is a Euro-wide venture which brings together writers (mainly poets) from minority languages in order that they may translate one another. In most cases, an Elephant is required – a bridge language, generally English. This involvement led to a new understanding on my part, that inward translation is a means of testing and extending the native, a way of adding to the body of literature written in that form – a means of enrichment.¹⁵ So far, as a result of LAF, I’ve translated – via these Elephants – the work of over 20 contemporary European poets into my version of Shetlandic Scots.¹⁶ In each case I learned something about my native tongue as a consequence.

Yet translation is no simple business – it is, and always has been, fraught with the issue of correspondence: how can two essentially different things be made alike?

Re-Creative Writing

We might argue that the original process of creating in language is just this: a process of translation, in its broadest sense, of mood or feeling or idea or observation into thought-words, then those into writing – then follows ‘translation’ from draft to draft until: alchemy, the energy has led to something magical. All that making in the workshop has created something – we hope: the encoding of meaning; an event in semantics, and perhaps publishing – we hope. The energy of composition has, ideally, crystallized something to be treasured – even festishized: ‘The Definitive Text’.

However, publication and its core notion of ‘deadline’ do not always coincide with completion. Writers may be hurried towards it, the published text may be incomplete. It may be the victim of careless publishing, littered with typographical errors. The ‘definitive’ is not really, then, a thing that resides in any of the editions or revisions – it is not made of text at all. It is in the author’s mind, an ideal aspired to, and, on rare occasion, blissfully achieved. The ‘made thing’, that fixed identity in words – the event in published language – emerges out of flux, and stops the creative process, sometimes drastically.

Translation is kindred to creation, but different in that it begins with reading whereas creation ends with it. Translation responds to the original by freeing it as a mutable thing, a complex of encoded ideas and associations not merely to be admired, but transmuted, necessarily rearranged. It is, in effect, a kind of ‘Re-Creative Writing’. So the translator and the creator are not so far apart – indeed the essential semantic instability of any text, dependent on the subjectivity of the reader, suggests that translation is not such a different thing from the kind of necessary interpretation made by a reader in their native language.

Ah, but poetry – it is often said – is untranslatable; an idea sometimes attributed to Coleridge and the elevated Romantic station of the poetic art his work helped to engender. But it is an ancient thought, and in more recent times we find Roman Jakobsen taking it up: “Poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition – from one poetic shape to another, or interlingual transposition – from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic transposition – from one system of signs into another, eg. from verbal art into music, dance, cinema or painting.”¹⁷

This distinction between translation and transposition is hierarchical – the presence of the word ‘only’ suggests the latter is inferior. In ‘transposing’ a poem interlingually, something less than ‘translation’ takes place. The person responsible is at best a ‘transposer’ – which has an amusing if accidental negative connotation, in its association with the French loan, ‘poseur’. The implication is that we are fooling ourselves if we imagine otherwise.

The text, to the structuralist, is the text is the text – a fact, or series of facts, ink marks on paper. But what is contained there, especially in the case of poetry, is something other, something allusive and elusive, even in the original – a complex of sound, image and idea, within an architecture, if we follow Pound’s following of Aristotle.¹⁸ As different languages encode different world views, different ways of thinking about experience, so replication is impossible. “A word is a microcosm of human consciousness,” as Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky¹⁹ wrote. Poetry, which makes such use of the musicality and the associative power of words,

where density of allusion and ambiguity is far greater than in speech or prose writing, must inevitably be misrepresented in ‘transposition’. But then poetry, one might argue, lies in the active attempt at understanding, not graphs, and translation at best is exactly that.

Reading poetry is difficult enough in one’s native tongue – the very nature of it resists the intelligence, almost successfully, as Wallace Stevens²⁰ phrased it. A translation is always partial, a subjective reading, a response to a call, to some appeal found in the original, but if the thing that is made is genuinely responsive, based on deep understanding of the original, the ‘transposition’ may itself attain the state of being poetic. Poetry is not, then, simply what is lost in translation, as Robert Frost once famously remarked – it is also, potentially, what is found. And if all translations fail to make different things alike, that is simply inevitable.

Untranslatability is part of translation as Jacques Derrida once said: “.... There is no experience of translation when we don’t experience the untranslatable ... it’s absolutely linked to the idiom, to the extent that the idiom is not translatable, that the translation translates the untranslatable. That’s why literature *is* the experience of translation, is what calls for translation. To write a poem, an untranslatable poem, calls for translation. The poem cries for being translated precisely because it can’t be. That’s why we try and translate Hölderlin and Milton and Mallarmé, and we know that they are not translatable. But that’s why the untranslatability is not a negative concept. It’s not opposed to translatability. Untranslatability is the element of translation.”²¹

The difficulty is intrinsic to the process – as being elephantine is a condition of being an Elephant. And however oppressed we native speakers of Gaelic or Scots may have been by being educated in English, we are at least fluent in one of the world’s great languages – not the case with all minority language speakers.

I feel we should use this to our advantage – by taming the Elephant, become ‘mahout’, and guide it to where we want to go. We should endeavour actively to direct it, and not lie passively abed awaiting the crush. And that is just what we are doing, Maoilios Caimbeul and myself, in using it as vehicle for this Gaelic/Scots exchange. ■

Notes

1. www.dsl.ac.uk
2. The Concise Scots Dictionary, ed. Mairi Robinson, 1985
3. Scots: The Mither Tongue, Billy Kay, 1986.
4. The Language of the People William Donaldson, 1989
5. But n Ben A-Go-Go, 2000
6. www.itchy-coo.com
7. The Edinburgh Companion to Scots, eds. John Corbett; Derrick McClure; Jane Stuart-Smith
8. A Dictionary of North East Dialect, 2002
9. in the essay ‘A “Quite-Right” apo da Saekrit Paetbank’, 2004 – English translation of the original Shetlandic text is available at <http://www.robertalanjamieson.info>
10. Grammar and Usage of The Shetland Dialect, ed. Robertson and Graham, 1952; The Shetland Dictionary, ed. John J. Graham, 1979
11. ‘Independent Writing’ in Edinburgh Review 86, ed. Murdo Macdonald, 1991
12. in A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle, 1926
13. Index on Censorship, 3/1993
14. www.lit-across-frontiers.org
A book of translations from the LAF workshop held in Shetland in 2005 was published by the award-winning Casroom Press in conjunction with the Scottish Poetry Library (ed. Robyn Marsack, 2006)
15. for information on and examples of translation into Scots, see European Poetry in Scotland: An Anthology of Translations, ed. Peter France and Duncan Glen, 1989
16. www.robertalanjamieson.info/translations.html
17. ‘On Linguistic Aspects of Translation’, in On Translation, ed. Bower, 1959
18. discussion of logopoeia, phanopoeia, and melopoeia in How to Read, 1931
19. Thought and Language, trans. Hanfinn and Vakar, 1962
20. in ‘Man carrying Thing’, Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, 1990
21. www.pum.umontreal.ca/revues/surfaces/vol6/krieger.html

New Gaelic Writing at Northwords Now

NORTHWORDS NOW OCCUPIES something not unlike the place previously occupied by the Magazine Northwords which was published out of Dingwall from 1991 till 2004.

What do we mean by ‘North’? Our interests are wide-ranging. They extend beyond a fixed geographical location. We’ve had a featured review of 20thc. Russian poetry; an essay on Margaret Tait, Orkney poet and film-maker; have used images from Inuit art and have been offered an essay on the Sami.

To date most of what we have published has been unsolicited. Some wonderful surprises come our way.

We are a magazine where creative writing can be published. The ties of the writing or the writer to the north may be close or not. We look for ‘high quality’, by which is meant, that which is satisfying to readers of discrimination and experience. We have a sound reviews section and seek informed and lively reviewers. And we have a features section which is evolving into a mix

of researched essays and reviews of books or events which merit specialised attention.

We also aim to be accessible to a wide (mainly English-speaking) readership. We have a 7000 print run per issue and the fact that we are, notionally, ‘Free’ makes it easy for us to place NNow with stockists across Scotland; and for them to be able to report on high rate of uptake.

We get messages from readers saying how they have enjoyed it.

We have had, to date, something GAELIC in every issue: poetry, a schools project (Plockton/Sorley), and 6 excellent poetry collections to review. And now we have begun, in collaboration with established Gaelic writers, to formalise a Gaelic policy.

We are being supported and encouraged by HIE with HI-Arts in this enterprise.

Northwords Now is published three

times yearly. The Autumn issue is planned for 1st November ‘08; the Spring issue for 1st March ‘09. It is planned that there will be a Gaelic Editor in place for these 2 issues. This person will be keen to receive submissions of new creative Gaelic writing, of suggestions for essays or features on matters that are issues ‘now’ for Gaelic writers.

Anyone wishing to have more information, or wanting to submit material for possible publication should write to the **General Editor at Northwords Now, PO Box 5706, INVERNESS. IV1 9AF**. It will be passed on to the Gaelic Editor.

Rhoda Michael
(aka Rhoda Dunbar)
Editor NNow